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ABSTRACT

Forty-four family-oriented, prime time television program episodes (30 hours) aired in November and December 1982 were selected for content analysis from 12 commercial television series which met selection criteria for Neilsen Television rating, airing time, and theme. Family oriented programming was defined as any series with a primary theme that centered on family life with primary characters that included parent(s) and children under 18. Parental behaviors were coded that reflected performance of parental role, child rearing patterns, and children's responses to those roles and patterns. Results indicated that relatively large numbers of parenting behaviors were being illustrated in the programs viewed. Television fathers were somewhat more active as parents than were mothers, and both mothers and fathers were portrayed in traditional ways, even though many more non-traditional than traditional family structures were presented. Television children responded differently to performance of parental roles and to child rearing patterns according to the sex of the television parent. Based on findings, several recommendations were made for parent and family life education and further related research. A four-page reference list is provided. (Author/LMM)

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PARENTING BEHAVIORS IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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PARENTING BEHAVIORS IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS

Abstract

This study used the content analysis research technique to identify parenting behaviors portrayed in family-oriented prime-time television programs. The behaviors coded reflected performance of the parental role, child rearing patterns, and children's responses to those roles and patterns. Results indicated that relatively large numbers of parenting behaviors were being illustrated in the programs viewed. Television fathers were somewhat more active as parents than were mothers and both mothers and fathers were protrayed in traditional ways, even though many more non-traditional than traditional family structures were represented. Television children responded differently to performance of parental roles and to child rearing patterns according to sex of the television parent. Based on the findings, several recommendations were made for parent and family life education and further related research.

The parental role has been of interest to a wide variety of professionals, including those in child development, adult development, family sociology, family therapy, family life education, and home economics education. Each of these disciplines has recognized that parenting behaviors are influenced by a number of factors both inside and outside the family system. Those factors which have been recognized and studied include: family structure and size (Schlesinger, 1966; Zajonic, 1976) parental age (Seth and Khanna, 1978); sex, age and number of children (Knox and Wilson, 1978; Nye, Carlson, and Garrett, 1979; Sears, Maccoby, and Levin, 1957; Weinrub and Frankel, 1977);rural/urban living environment (Snow, 1981); socioeconomic and educational level (Gecas, 1979; Wright and Wright, 1976); sex of parent (Carter and Welch, 1981); religion (Duvall, 1971); ethnic orientation (Lambert, Triandis, and Wolf, 1958); work pattern of parents (Holmstrom, 1972); and the child him/herself (Bell and Harper, 1977).

One potential influence upon parenting behavior that has received little attention is the mass media. Carlson and Crase (1983) content analyzed childrearing information in popular magazines, and Ramsdell (1973) and Fisher (1974) examined marital and family roles shown on television. There has also been other research concerned with adult television viewing patterns (LoSciuto, 1971) the effect of television on adults (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs and Roberts, 1978), and the effect of television on family interaction (Brody, Stoneman, and Sanders, 1980; Hess and Goldman, 1961; Maccoby, 1951). These researchers recognized both the widespread use of television and its potential effects. However, none of them addressed the specific parenting behaviors portrayed in television programs.

Purpose and Conceptual Framework

Recognizing that parenting behavior is influenced by factors external to the family and that the average American spends more time watching television that doing anything else but sleeping (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1981), the present study was designed to investigate the nature of parenting behaviors portrayed in family-centered prime-time television programs. Prime time was selected because it is known to attract the largest viewing audience among almost all ages (A.C. Nielsen, 1977).

Definitions of parenting behaviors from both sociology and child development were used as the basis for identifying the nature of parenting behaviors portrayed in prime-time television. The sociological definitions, which described the parental role, were instrumental and expressive.

The instrumental role is traditionally assigned to the male and concerns functions external to the family. The primary area of performance is the occupation-oriented one and the function is to provide for the family (Zelditch, 1974). Within the family system, the performance of this role includes discipline and control over children and final family decision-making (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

The expressive role is, by tradition, given to the female and is concerned primarily with internal family functioning. It includes the bearing and rearing of children and the nurturance of all family members (Safillios-Rothschild, 1977). The expressive role is a passive, subservient one, and serves to establish a warm, comforting, nonpunitive emotional climate within the family (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

The child development definitions, based on the work of Baumrind (1971), describe child rearing patterns as being authoritarian, authoritative, and/or permissive. The authoritarian parent expects high levels of obedience

from a child without the need to explain the rationale behind the rule or punishment. The child is taught that all parental actions are oriented toward the good of the child, and the child is not autonomous. An authoritative parent allows the child autonomy within the framework of the parent-child relationship and within reasonable limits. The child is encouraged to verbalize his/her own ideas and feelings and receives explanations for parental decisions. A permissive parent encourages a high degree of autonomy for the child and avoids exercising parental control. The parent does not see the parental role as one of support and resource for the child.

Research questions this study addressed included the following:

1. To what extent are parenting behaviors portrayed in family-oriented prime-time television programs?
2. Which types of parental roles (instrumental or expressive) and child rearing patterns (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) predominate in family-oriented prime-time television programs?
3. How do children respond to parental role performance and child rearing patterns in prime-time television programs?
4. Does the nature of parental role portrayals or child rearing patterns vary according to the sex of television parents?
5. Does the nature of children's responses to parenting behaviors vary according to the type of parental roles or child rearing patterns exhibited by television parents?
6. What are the implications of these television portrayals for parent and family life education and further research?

Methodology

To collect the data for the study, a sample of family-oriented prime-time television programs was selected, videotaped, and coded.

Population and Sample

The population for the study included all family-oriented television series aired during prime time in November and December 1982 that had Nielsen Television Ratings of .10 in overall rating or rating for the men's or women's 18-34 year old group (Nielsen Station Index, 1982). Prime-time television programming was defined as that shown between 7:00 and 10:00 p.m. in the midwest on all three major commercial networks (ABC, NBC, CBS). Family-oriented programming was defined as any series with a primary theme that centered on family life and with primary characters that included parent(s) (single parent, dual parents, stepparent(s), adoptive parent(s)) and child(ren) of any age under 18 (stepchildren, adoptive children, and natural children). Twelve different television series met these criteria. From these series, a sample of 44 half-hour and hour-long episodes (30 hours of programming) was selected. Programs were not selected randomly since programs aired back-to-back during the same time periods and video-taping capability was limited. However, some randomization was incorporated by selecting no more than five episodes of any one series and attempting to code approximately equal numbers of programs and hours of programming on each of the three networks. Advertisements aired during these time periods were not examined.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to code the parenting behaviors was designed for the study utilizing the research technique, content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; Way, 1983). This methodology allows for the "objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p. 18) and permits the drawing of "replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21).

The unit of measurement for the instrument was verbalization occurring within the context of parent-child interaction. Coding units were established to reflect both parental role and child rearing pattern. For parental role, phrases or sentences reflecting one main idea, that were spoken by parents immediately prior to a child response, were coded as instrumental, expressive, or neutral. This category of parent-child interaction was felt to partially reflect the context within which the particular patterns of child rearing were occurring. For child rearing pattern, phrases or sentences spoken directly to a child were coded as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neutral. For both categories, child responses were coded as either positive or negative when they occurred as direct verbal responses to the parent, even when they occurred at the end of a series of parental behaviors. If the child was an infant, parent verbalizations were recorded only in the instrumental/expressive category and child response was coded, if it was discernible, by positive (smile, coo) or negative (cry).

To establish content validity, descriptors for each of the coding categories in the instrument were drawn from the appropriate literature and submitted to a panel of three experts in sociology and child development. Only those descriptors which were accepted by all raters were retained. Examples of descriptors for each of the coding units in the instrument are:

Parental Role

Instrumental	takes major responsibility for decision making, discourages emotional dependency, achievement-oriented
Expressive	nuturant, provides security, supportive, enriches environment
Neutral	directions to child in form of request, comment on neutral subject

Child Rearing Pattern		
	Authoritarian	firm enforcer of rules, demanding, uses negative sanctions
	Authoritative	encourages discussion with child, flexible, encourages individuality in child
	Permissive	allows child to be annoying, avoids confrontation, largely non-directive
	Neutral	general comments not intended to be directive
Child Response		
	Positive	okay, sounds good, you're right, um-hum
	Negative	no way, forget it, I will not, try to make me

To establish inter-coder reliability, three programs were each coded independently by three persons. Overall instrument reliability, according to the r^2 reliability coefficient (Kerlinger, 1973) was .89, reflecting 89 percent agreement between coders. Reliability estimates for each of the instrument sub-sections are given in Table 1. In addition to the parental role behaviors, the child rearing style behaviors, and child responses, the final form of the instrument contained space for recording program variables (e.g., network and time), sex of parent, and family structure (e.g., dual parent, single parent).

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

A total of 955 behaviors reflecting parental role were observed, 833 reflecting child rearing patterns, and 820 and 508 reflecting child responses, respectively (Table 2). Many of the same behaviors were included in both the parental role and child rearing pattern coding categories. The differences in absolute counts are due to the differences in the coding criteria. Overall, about 20 parenting behaviors were observed per program and 30 per hour of programming. These interactions took up a total of 129

minutes of air time; 3.7 minutes per program. Expressive parental role performance and authoritative child rearing patterns were most prevalent. Positive child responses also far exceeded negative responses.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 presents a breakdown of the instrumental and expressive role performance according to male and female parents, and child response. Overall, more male parental role expressions were observed than were female expressions. In addition, proportionately more child responses occurred when the interaction was between a father and child than between a mother and child. For both mothers and fathers, expressive behaviors were most frequently observed. However, chi-square indicated that mothers exhibited proportionately more expressive behaviors and fathers proportionately more instrumental behaviors ($p \leq .01$).

No significant difference was found in the nature of children's responses to fathers according to the parental role fathers' exhibited. However, there was a difference ($p \leq .001$) according to the parental role mothers exhibited. Children's responses to mothers were much more often positive when mothers were exhibiting instrumental ($X^2 = 14.71$, $p \leq .001$) or neutral ($X^2 = 29.34$, $p \leq .001$) behaviors than when they were exhibiting expressive behaviors.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 presents the authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive child rearing behaviors observed according to the sex of the television parents. Again, more parenting behaviors were identified for males than females and the tendency, for both males and females, was toward authoritative child rearing patterns. However, the television mothers and fathers differed significantly ($p \leq .01$) in the child rearing patterns they portrayed. Fathers were more authoritarian compared to mothers who were both more

authoritative ($X^2 = 8.69$, $p \leq .01$) and neutral ($X^2 = 5.19$, $p \leq .05$).

Unlike responses to parental role performance, children's responses to behaviors reflecting child rearing patterns occurred proportionately about as often when the interaction was between a father and child as between a mother and child. No significant differences were found in the nature of children's responses to parental behaviors reflecting child rearing style for mothers. However, there was a highly significant difference ($p \leq .001$) for fathers. Children responded much more positively to fathers' authoritative behaviors than they did to fathers' authoritarian behaviors ($X^2 = 22.55$, $p \leq .001$). The chi-square contrasts between fathers' authoritarian and permissive, and authoritarian and neutral behaviors were also significant (at $p \leq .05$). However, the differences may be inflated due to the empty cell in each of the cases (Stahl and Hennes, 1980).

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

This study offers further evidence that television is a major source of messages about family roles and interaction patterns, an agent of socialization, that may affect our conceptions and behavior (Ramsdell, 1973; Fisher, 1974). Measures of the frequency of various television portrayals give some indication of the strength of the stimulus viewers are receiving. The present study found the parental role exhibited 31.8 times per hour and child rearing patterns portrayed 27.8 times per hour. Portrayals involving the consumption of alcohol on prime-time and day-time programming occur only up to about four times per hour and yet are believed to comprise a very strong set of messages for viewers (Breed and DeFoe, 1981; Garlington, 1977; Greenberg, Fernandez-Collado, Graef, Korzenny, and Atkin, 1979; Lowry, 1980). Since previous research (Gans, 1968; Logciuto, 1971) suggests that viewers

do identify with and use television as a source of help with their personal lives, it appears television has the potential to influence parenting behavior.

What is the nature of this potential influence? Based on the findings, it is clear that males are being portrayed as active parents in family-oriented prime-time television programs. Male television parents consistently exhibited greater numbers of parenting behaviors than did female parents, even though female parents outnumbered males in the programs examined.

Traditionally, it has been thought that parental role behavior was linked to sex-role socialization. Thus, it was expected that fathers would be portrayed as more instrumental on television and mothers as more expressive. The extent to which this occurred was surprising, however, in light of the family structures represented in the programs coded. Of the 44 programs observed, about twice as many took place in single parent as dual parent settings: 21 percent were single female parent families, 35 percent single male parent; 29 percent dual parent; and 14 percent other, such as cohabitation arrangements and non-family groups. Thus, while network television programming appears to be realistically reflecting the documented increase in single parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980), there is little evidence that a concurrent change in parental role performance (i.e., more equal instrumentality and expressivity on the part of mothers and fathers) is being reflected.

The intent of coding children's responses to parenting behaviors was to obtain some measure of the kinds of behaviors children were reinforcing. It is interesting that television children were shown reinforcing television fathers' performance of the parental role to the same degree regardless of whether it was instrumental, expressive, or neutral. And it was

somewhat surprising that the children were shown rejecting mothers' expressive behaviors while rewarding mothers' neutral and instrumental behaviors. One might speculate that, in the hurry to portray the American family more realistically, network television has inadvertently treated males as more "able" parents than females and capable of eliciting equally favorable responses from their children regardless of the specific parental role they choose to enact.

With respect to patterns of child rearing, it was not surprising that fathers were portrayed as more authoritarian than mothers since authoritarian traits have been said to be more commonly male (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). Thus, it appears that in this area, family-oriented prime-time television programming is also projecting a sense of traditionalism in male and female behavior, despite the attempt to portray non-traditional family patterns.

The television children's responses to the various child rearing patterns represent a contrast to their responses to parental role performance. Here, children were shown as being equally accepting of all child rearing patterns exhibited by mothers but not fathers. This is particularly interesting in view of Baumrind's (1971) belief that authoritative child rearing patterns are healthiest for both children and their parents. When viewing prime-time family-oriented television, viewers are seeing that healthier parent-child relationships result when fathers are more authoritative than authoritarian, but not so for mothers. If authoritative child rearing behaviors are indeed "healthier," one cannot help but wonder whether such mother-child portrayals will have a negative effect on real world families, especially those headed by single females. Measurement of this "effect" or "non-effect" was beyond the scope of this study. However, in view of these findings, it was comforting to reflect on the fact that authoritative child rearing patterns were portrayed much more often than authoritarian,

permissive, and neutral for both males and females.

Implications and Future Directions

Neilsen surveys indicate that significant numbers of people in the 18-34 age group watch family situational programming (A.C. Nielsen, 1977). Many of these people are parents or will become parents in the future. Since television programming may be considered an influential source of learning (Comstock, 1978; Dail, 1983; Postman, 1979), careful attention to program content is warranted. This is particularly important when considering the actual nature of the parental role and the susceptibility it has to outside influence (Clark-Stewart, 1978; Whiting, 1974). Thus, these findings have immediate implications for parent and family life education programs.

One of the major implications for educational programming stems from the findings that television fathers are shown as more instrumental than television mothers. It may be important, particularly at the secondary level, to encourage students to examine these portrayals in order to promote a more realistic understanding of the maternal role in all family structures represented in today's society. Similarly, it may be necessary to help both males and females understand the nature of expressivity and become more accepting of expressivity on the part of fathers.

Other implications relate to the findings that television fathers are portrayed as more authoritarian than mothers and that children's responses to child rearing patterns vary according to sex of the parents. Parent and family life educators could use these portrayals to examine child rearing patterns in relation to sex role stereotyping. Fathers' portrayals could be used to illustrate both the positive and negative effects of adopting various child rearing patterns. Finally, educators could promote critical

examination of the real world effects of various parenting behaviors by focusing on the non-existent differential child responses to mothers' child rearing patterns.

It has been noted that, to date, few other studies have systematically examined parenting behaviors portrayed in the mass media. None have attempted to investigate the effect of these portrayals on parents and future parents. Thus, there is a great need for much more research in this area. The same content analysis techniques could be applied to parent education literature and other kinds of communication such as radio, newspapers, and television programs besides those which are family-oriented and those aired during prime-time (e.g., movies and talk shows). Advertisements, in printed, audio, and visual forms, may also contain content relevant to parenting behavior. Logitudinal analyses of these messages would be useful to identify changes in content over time and in relation to changes in social structures.

Finally, there is a need to analyze the relative effects of formal (e.g., school) and informal (e.g., media) influences on parenting behavior. To do so will not be an easy task and will probably require the development of new theoretical frameworks and use of experimental research designs. Some important questions will likely be (Way, 1983): "What factors contribute to .... 'parent socialization'?"; "What are the personal and family inputs to these socialization processes?"; "What socialization agents and agent-learner relationships are involved?"; "What are the specific socialization outcomes?"; "What are the interrelationships between the inputs, processes, and outcomes?"; and "How do they change over time?" The effect of television on parenting behavior is not at all well understood, but the findings of the present study raise some interesting questions.

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Table 1

Reliability Estimates for Each of the Instrument Sub-Sections

Instrumental	.81	Authoritarian	.85
Expressive	.87	Authoritative	.87
Neutral	.89	Permissive	.98
		Neutral	.89
	Child Response	.98	

Table 2

Density of Parenting Behaviors in Family-Oriented Prime-Time Television Programs (N=44)

Behavior		Total Number	$\bar{X}$ Number Per Program
Instrumental		293	6.65
Expressive		411	9.34
Neutral		251	5.70
	Total	955	21.70
Positive Child Response		708	16.09
Negative Child Response		112	2.54
Authoritarian		215	4.88
Authoritative		416	9.45
Permissive		19	0.43
Neutral		183	4.15
	Total	833	18.93
Positive Child Response		435	9.88
Negative Child Response		73	1.66

Table 3

Parental Role Performance and Child Responses by Sex of Character

Parental Role[a]	Male Parent (N=26)		Child Response[b]				Female Parent (N=35)		Child Response[c]			
			Positive		Negative				Positive		Negative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Instrumental	189	33	87	27	25	34	104	27	48	41	9	23
Expressive	220	39	134	42	31	43	191	49	24	20	28	72
Neutral	156	28	97	31	17	23	95	24	46	39	2	5
Total	565	100	318		73		390	100	118		39	

[a] X^2 for total male/female behaviors = 9.81, 2df, $p \leq .01$

[b] X^2 child response to father = 2.05, 2df, $p > .05$

[c] X^2 child response to mother = 36.93, 2df, $p \leq .001$

Table 4

Behaviors Reflecting Child Rearing Patterns and Child Responses

by Sex of Character

Child Rearing Pattern[a]	Male Parent (N=26)						Female Parent (N=35)					
			Child Response[b]						Child Response[c]			
			Positive		Negative				Positive		Negative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Authoritarian	146	29	55	22	29	78	69	20	41	22	6	21
Authoritative	232	47	135	54	14	22	184	55	108	58	19	68
Permissive	15	3	9	4	0	0	4	1	3	2	0	0
Neutral	104	21	50	20	2	4	79	24	34	18	3	11
Total	497		249		45		336		186		28	

[a] X^2 for total male/female behaviors = 12.27, 3df, $p \leq .01$

[b] X^2 for child response to father = 34.74, 3df, $p \leq .001$

[c] X^2 for child response to mother = 1.25, 3df, $p > .05$